

USDA Agricultural Outlook Forum 2007

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AVIAN INFLUENZA: A GLOBAL CHALLENGE

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Avian influenza is advancing. During 2006, some 40 countries experienced outbreaks for the first time, bringing the total of affected countries to 55. Moreover, in recent months there has been a disturbing resurgence in countries that had been considered success stories. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, known as FAO, in January expressed concern about new flare-ups of avian influenza in China, Egypt, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Nigeria, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam, although it stressed that the number of outbreaks in the first weeks of 2007 was significantly lower than the epidemic waves of last year. The UN agency urged countries to remain vigilant and fully cooperate with international organizations as the virus continues to kill people and damage farmers' livelihoods.

FAO reports that over 200 million poultry have died or been culled worldwide since the end of 2003 -- a tremendous economic loss in itself, which is multiplied by losses from diminished egg production and reduced activity in distribution channels. The largest declines occurred in Vietnam and Thailand, where they were equal to 15-20 percent of the stock of poultry. While there was some rebound, we await the impact of the disease's re-emergence. In the spring of last year, consumption of poultry meat dropped by more than half in some states in the European Union. And the European public harbored misunderstandings about the nature of the problem. According to a European Commission survey of 25,000 people in 25 countries done in March and April of 2006, 28 percent of respondents did not know that avian flu cannot be transmitted through properly cooked eggs and poultry meat.

Of critical importance, there remains the risk that the virus could mutate and result in sustained and efficient human-to-human transmission. In our worst-case scenario, if a human pandemic occurred today and was as severe as that of 1918, one estimate is that 142 million people would die worldwide (possibly 1.9 million in the United States alone). A pandemic could cause major disruption as sick workers stay home, causing production to drop and businesses to curtail operations; schools and other institutions could close to prevent the spread of the virus; it could affect supplies of food, water, medications and other essentials; and it could overload health care facilities. The World Bank has estimated that a severe pandemic among humans could cost the global economy about 3.1 percent of gross domestic product, or around \$1.25 trillion. The Director General of the

World Health Organization said in January of this year, "As long as the virus continues to circulate in birds, the threat of a pandemic will persist. The world is years away from control in the agricultural sector. The message is straightforward: we must not let down our guard."

The U.S. Government is not letting down its guard. While we focus on both the threat of avian influenza and its possible mutation into a human pandemic, in terms of animal health we in the U.S. Government share a common goal with you who are involved in the livestock and poultry sectors: to confront the expansion of avian influenza, to contain it at its source and to prevent its entry into the United States.

As the Senior Coordinator for our international engagement, I will focus my remarks here on the nature of the avian threat abroad and the measures the U.S. Government and the international community are taking to limit that threat. In contrast, the vastly important responsibility of how we might deal with the possibility of a human pandemic outbreak in this country primarily falls under the purview of other government agencies, particularly the Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Homeland Security (DHS).

In September 2005, President Bush announced the establishment of the International Partnership on Avian and Pandemic Influenza to elevate the issue on national agendas and coordinate efforts among donor and affected nations. The White House Homeland Security Council issued the U.S. *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza* in November 2005 and the accompanying *Implementation Plan* in May 2006. The Department of State is responsible for coordinating the U.S. Government's international engagement and works closely with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), HHS, DHS and the Department of Defense, as well as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and others, to meet this global challenge.

At the most recent major international conference on avian and pandemic influenza in Bamako, Mali, in December 2006, the United States increased its pledge to a total of \$434 million in international assistance (the largest of any donor government) to facilitate the development of national plans; to support development of diagnostics and laboratory capacity; to conduct international communications campaigns; to deploy and train scientists veterinarians and public health experts; and to take other measures.

The efforts that we in the U.S. Government have undertaken span the globe. USDA has trained approximately 500 veterinarians and diagnosticians from 100 countries in veterinary epidemiology and avian influenza diagnostic protocols to support disease surveillance and control measures. USDA and USAID are providing expertise and funding for the establishment of the new Crisis Management Center at FAO headquarters in Rome to facilitate the international rapid response to animal outbreaks worldwide. In this hemisphere, U.S. Government agencies work with the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) and the Pan American Health Organization to address animal health and food safety issues. IICA, which receives 60 percent of its funding from the U.S. Government, works on the larger issue of building veterinary infrastructure, and it also has produced and distributed a series of radio messages for

farmers, educating them about the avian influenza virus and how they can work to help control and contain it. Representatives from the United States, Canada and Mexico are working on a North American Plan for Avian and Pandemic Influenza as part of the Security and Prosperity Partnership and are coordinating surveillance efforts for the early detection of H5N1 in wild birds.

Much has been done, but the threat persists. We have learned that the disease is difficult to eradicate and even control. In Indonesia, where the disease is endemic, and in Nigeria, where we fear it may become so, we have yet to see effective controls. For a variety of reasons -- administrative decentralization, cultural differences, a paucity of resources -- Indonesia and sub-Saharan Africa saw a rapid spread of the virus, to the point that Indonesia has overtaken Vietnam as the country with the highest number of human fatalities. In fact, it is safe to say that Indonesia has become ground zero in the fight to contain avian flu and to prevent the virus from mutating into one that can spread efficiently on a sustained basis from human to human. Moreover, in Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, Hong Kong and Korea, where we witnessed seemingly effective control efforts, the disease has re-emerged. Egypt has seen a resurgence of human cases in the past few months; indeed, Egypt has joined Indonesia and Nigeria as one of the countries of greatest concern.

We and our international partners will continue to emphasize the active engagement of governments, international organizations, the private sector, non-governmental organizations and others to deal with continuing challenges and emerging needs. We are looking to you, the private sector, to see where you have partnerships internationally and to ask where you might have the comparative advantage in gaining the commitment of important private sector players in affected countries to militate for an effective response to the animal disease in those countries.

Progress in improving the state of preparedness in the United States may be impressive, but contrasting it with the need for much greater preparedness in many of the world's developing nations, which lack the necessary infrastructure, can be dispiriting. We have our national *Implementation Plan*, and USDA in particular is prepared to react quickly and decisively should the H5N1 virus reach these shores. But there are limits to our ability to substitute for national will or ability in all areas of the world. We and our international partners will continue to engage actively as governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and the private sector cooperate to meet the challenges presented by the spread of avian influenza and the possibility of a human pandemic.